



## How Influential Leaders Think

By Kerry Patterson

As my coauthors and I completed the research for our latest book, *Influencer: The Power to Change Anything*, we traveled the world and studied influential leaders from every language, culture, business type and government entity imaginable. To our delight, we discovered that despite their obvious differences, influential leaders shared one aspect in common: each saw him- or herself not simply as a leader, but as a person who was responsible for creating systematic and lasting change. In their view, creating change wasn't a secondary job, it wasn't someone else's job, and it wasn't something they could tinker with or put on the back burner while they worked on their real job. Creating change was their real job.



But not all leaders are so bold and self-aware. Instead of taking ownership for change, many leaders shun it at all costs. Here are a few of the less brazen types:

### Story Tellers

Less powerful leaders tend to view the world as a noxious, prickly place that resists their every effort. They are often

better at explaining why things can't change than they are at making improvements. To them, success is often defined as failure plus a good story. You might overhear them say: "Of course, the project eventually fell apart and let me tell you why . . ." At which point, they continue on to tell a clever story punctuated with humorous anecdotes or accompanied by a vibrant slide show. This narrative-based strategy shouldn't come as a surprise to anyone because it's far easier to learn how to tell an engaging story than it is to create change.

Unlike story tellers, influential leaders don't allow themselves the luxury of replacing success with a clever story. They don't let others do so either. They know a failure when they see one, diagnose where they went wrong, and then make changes to their plan. Effective influencers are experimenters, not story tellers.

### Blame Shifters

Another group of ineffective leaders are perfectly satisfied if they can explain that they did their jobs, but the lousy people "out there" hadn't done theirs. For instance, after talking to the leader of a 4,000-person organization about a rather embarrassing problem a group of consultants had recently surfaced, the leader's answer was short and smug. "I wrote a memo. They know better."

Influential leaders act differently. If their first efforts to put

the problem to bed don't succeed, they expand their efforts. They try something new. They kick up the number of influence strategies. And they never let themselves off the hook. Effective influencers seek to fix problems, not the blame.

### Pretenders

I find great insight and humor in the following expression: "I'm sure glad I don't like broccoli because if I liked broccoli I'd eat broccoli and I hate broccoli." The humor in this expression lies in the fact that people often pretend to adhere to a supposition, but then they can't. The person says if he liked broccoli he'd eat it and that would be horrible because broccoli tastes awful.

Many leaders fall prey to the same kind of illogical thinking. For example: "Would you be our after dinner speaker?" a senior manager asks me. "We really need someone who can talk about influence and who is entertaining. I hear that you're the man."

"I'd be honored," I respond, "How long have you scheduled for the speech?"

"An hour," the leader explains. "But 45 minutes would be better. Thirty minutes would be best. Could you cut it to twenty?"

"Heck," I reply, "If you'll mail me the fee, I won't show up at all!"

With speeches, training programs, or even entire change programs, many leaders don't really believe they're going to work. They sign up for the latest "thing" because they're desperate to do *something*. But since they don't really think the proposed solution is going to work, they strip it of everything they can—reducing their time and dollar commitment to the bare minimum—and in doing so, destroy the speech, the training program, the project, etc...



## Career Tips

Influential leaders go for it. They give change a chance by following a complete program. If they don't believe in a plan, they don't implement it. And they never implement a pretend initiative. Half-heartedly implemented (and thusly doomed) plans undermine credibility and eventually reduce the leader's sense of self-efficacy.

### Quick Fixers

Sister to the idea that you need to do the least amount possible to solve the problem is the notion that you can find a simple solution to a challenge that has plagued you for years. Long-standing problems require complex solutions preceded by complex diagnoses. Like it or not, the world is perfectly organized to create the problem you currently have and you'll typically have to deal with several underlying sources if you expect to create change. That means there aren't going to be any quick fixes.

Influential leaders who bring about massive and lasting change abhor quick fixes. Effective leaders are in it for the long haul, plan for the long haul, measure over the long haul, and aren't easily impressed by short-term blips that are quickly replaced by the previous low levels of performance, complete with the old problems.

To sum it up, influential leaders believe they're responsible for change, that stories aren't good enough, that casting blame is unforgivable, that pretending is irresponsible, and that complex problems call for complex solutions. On top of that, effective influencers also have at their disposal a variety of influence tools that they bring into play with every change effort. They don't merely *think* differently, they *do* differently.

Nevertheless, the most startling difference between those who create systematic and lasting changes and those who don't, lies in the belief that their primary job is to wield influence. It's their *raison d'être*. It's who they are. No other self-image suits them. And if you're a leader who is influential, no other self-image should suite you.

### About the Author

Kerry Patterson is the coauthor of the New York Times bestsellers *Influencer*, *Crucial Conversations*, and *Crucial Confrontations*. He is also a sought-after speaker and consultant and cofounder of VitalSmarts, an innovator in corporate training and organizational performance. [www.vitalsmarts.com](http://www.vitalsmarts.com).

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